

Old Meg's Christmas Gift

Once upon a time, a long, long time ago, there was a cat that lived in the backwoods. Cats that live in the backwoods are usually wild-cats and have no names. But this cat was a tame cat that had a name and lived with a family. The family took good care of the cat,—that is, they usually did. But once they didn't and then the cat took good care of them. And that is what this story is about.

There were three people in the Austin family beside Meg, the cat: the father, the mother, and the eight-year-old daughter, whose name was Annie.

Their cabin stood by a beautiful waterfall, more than thirty miles from a settlement. Think of living thirty miles from the nearest neighbor,—two days' journey from a post office, a doctor, a church, a store! Two days going and two days more coming back. That is what it meant to live in the backwoods of New England two hundred years ago.

But the Austin family were true pioneers. They were used to hardship. They loved to explore the forests and streams, and to found new settlements.

"Some day," Mr. Austin was fond of saying, "there will be a town here, and people will bring their grain to my mill." For you must know that Mr. Austin was a miller by trade, and he had built his cabin by the finest water power in all the country 'round.

It was late in summer when the Austin family moved into their new home,—too late to plant crops. And as there was no grass or fodder in the backwoods, they brought with them no livestock,—neither pigs, nor cows, nor horses. The only tame animal about the cabin was Meg, the cat.

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But of wild animals there seemed to be a bountiful supply. The woods were full of wild turkeys, partridges, squirrels, rabbits, deer, and even bear. Upon this game, together with supplies from the distant settlement, they expected to live during the winter.

But before the middle of December, their food supply began to run low. Game had, for some reason, become extremely scarce in the neighborhood; the flour and meal were almost gone; and as for ammunition, there was left but a handful of powder and a few bullets.

So one day Mr. Austin buckled on his snow shoes, for the snow was deep on the forest trail, bade his wife and daughter good-by, and set out for the settlement. "God willing," he said, "I'll be back with supplies in four days." Soon he was out of sight among the trees. But it was many a day before he saw his family again.

He had hardly been gone an hour when the snow began to fall and the wind to blow furiously, whirling the snow into drifts. It was a terrible storm, such a storm as the settlers had never before seen or heard of. So long did it continue, and so heavy was the fall of snow, that the winter was long remembered, both by the white settlers and the Indians, as the "Winter of the Great Snow."

At last the storm ceased and the sun shone but it did not shine into the Austin cabin, for the wind had piled the snow to the very roof. The cabin buried in a huge snowdrift.

The inmates did not mind that, however, for though it was dark inside the cabin, it was snug and warm. There was plenty of wood on the wood pile, and they had shoveled a tunnel to it from the back door. "We shall not freeze, at any rate," said Mrs. Austin, cheerfully.

But as the days passed by, and the scanty supply of meal and meat grew less and less, with still no sign of Mr. Austin's return, they began to fear that he had perished, and that they would starve.

On the twelfth day they had eaten

the last bit of venison and the last crumb of bread. At bed-time, little Annie, who, for several days had eaten but one meal a day, was almost crying with hunger. Her Mother took her in her arms and comforted her as best she could. Then they knelt down and prayed very earnestly.

"Dear Heavenly Father," said Annie, "give us, this day, our daily bread, and please send my papa back to us safe and well."

The next morning, as they were sitting by the blazing fireplace, Mrs. Austin suddenly exclaimed: "Why, it is Christmas Day! A Merry Christmas to you, my little daughter." Tears were in her eyes, but she was smiling through her tears.

Hardly had she spoken, when there came a scratching at the door. And when the door was opened, who should walk in but Meg, the cat, dragging a big rabbit, which she laid at the feet of her mistress.

"OLD MEG'S CHRISTMAS GIFT!" cried Annie, clapping her hands, while her mother seized the rabbit and quickly prepared a delicious rabbit broth for breakfast, not forgetting to give Meg her share.

For three days they lived on rabbit broth and rabbit stew, making it go as far as possible, while old Meg gnawed the bones 'till there was scarcely anything left of them.

On the evening of the third day there came a shout from the edge of the forest, and three men with great packs on their backs were seen gliding on snowshoes toward the cabin.

In a moment more, Mr. Austin threw open the door and sprang into the room. Without a word, he took his wife and child into his arms, while all three offered a silent prayer of thanksgiving.

Food was soon cooking over the fire, and while her mother was getting the supper, little Annie told her father how old Meg saved them from starving on Christmas Day.

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